



**SPECIMENS
OF
SHAKESPEARE'S
SONNETS**

**WITH A BRIEF INTRODUCTION
BY
B. W. N. GRIGG**





SHAKESPEARE

1564
1616

McMaster University
LIBRARY

**Introductory
Note**



ORDSWORTH tells us that in his sonnets "Shakespeare unlocked his heart," and what a welling fountain of emotion that heart must have been! These poems show that the miracle of Shakespeare's intellect was matched by the miracle of Shakespeare's heart.

The sonnets are addressed with few exceptions to a young man, probably a nobleman, distinguished for his physical, intellectual and spiritual perfections. Of one hundred and fifty-four poems, the first one hundred and twenty-six celebrate this Friendship. What David was to Jonathan—what Keats was to Shelley—what Hallam was to Tennyson—what Edward King was to Milton—a certain friend, whom we cannot identify, was to Shakespeare.

The poems are addressed to this friend in such rich, eloquent, tender language, that we are in some instances, at least, astonished at the "abandon" that is shown. It must have been a wonderful personality that could have called forth such a wealth of love and devotion as is expressed in these sonnets.

The sonnets of Shakespeare have occasioned an immense amount of interesting discussion. One of the most perplexing and apparently insoluble questions is as to the identity of the friend to whom the poems were addressed. They were dedicated by the publisher

to "W. H.", but it is impossible to decide for certain among the friends of Shakespeare who "W. H" was—so that the promise of the poet that his friend's fame would live forever in his verse has not been fulfilled. The result is that, like the grave of the unknown warrior, the sonnets are a sacred yet impersonal shrine.

The poems, most resembling in spirit this series of sonnets, are contained in the "In Memoriam" of Tennyson, and while our language lasts the friendship of Hallam and Tennyson will be celebrated. At first sight it seems regrettable that the identity of the dedicatee of the sonnets has not been as surely established as that of Hallam, but perhaps it is better so. The poems celebrate Friendship as it never has been celebrated before in any literature, and Friendship is universal—"it is not of an age, it is for all time." It is the mighty cement of human life without which society would disintegrate, and it may be an advantage that these poems have been to a great degree rendered impersonal, because, that being the case, each reader can the more easily apply the sentiments so divinely expressed to his own circle of friends, or at least to some elect one of that circle. As long as our language lasts, as long perhaps as Time shall last, this tribute to Friendship will endure. The sonnets reveal an all conquering love, a love that is even sufficient to quench the most poignant jealousy.

The earlier sonnets (I-XXVI) urge his friend to marry and establish a home where his own virtues and graces will be reproduced in his children: the succeeding sonnets, (to CXXVI inclusive) treat mainly of love in absence. Of the remaining poems seventeen are addressed to a certain dark lady whose powers of fascination were counterbalanced by treachery—contrary qualities that call forth verses, now of lavish praise, now of powerful invective. It is well for the honor of her memory that the identity of the “dark lady” is as obscure as that of the ever mysterious “W. H.”

The few specimens collected herein are typical. There are many others of like quality, and if the perusal of this group should induce a systematic reading of the sonnets, it would be a “consummation devoutly to be wished.”

The sonnets were written between 1590 and 1600—authorities differing widely as to the actual date. Our purpose is not to add to the numerous critical essays that have been written on the sonnets, but simply to invite friends to share the pleasure of this—

“Well of English Undefined.”

CICERO said that friendship halves our sorrows and doubles our pleasures, and in the twenty-ninth of the Shakespeare sonnets this idea is treated in a poem that perhaps is not surpassed in eloquent simplicity by any of the others in the series—though it is difficult among such jewels to make comparisons.



WHEN, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless
cries,

And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scap',
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

**Twenty-
ninth**

THE poems from which we are quoting—there are a hundred and fifty-four of them—were called by Shakespeare's friends "sugared" on account of the warmth and tenderness of feeling expressed. In no other are these qualities more evident than in the following lines:

Thirtieth



HEN to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow, [waste:
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancel'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoan'd moan,
Which I now pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

MANY of the sonnets are word-pictures so clearly drawn that any artist might easily reproduce the poems. The fiftieth is picturesque in the extreme and represents the poet, mounted, journeying away from his friend at a leaden pace, his unwillingness to go being such that the beast he rides sympathizes with him. The fifty-first sonnet pictures the opposite situation where the fleetest of steeds is abandoned as too slow when returning to visit his friend. We quote only the fiftieth:



HOW heavy do I journey on the way,
When what I seek, my weary travel's end,
Doth teach that ease and that repose to say,
'Thus far the miles are measured from thy

The beast that bears me, tired with my woe, [friend.

Plods dully on, to bear that weight in me,

As if by some instinct the wretch did know

His rider loved not speed, being made from thee:

The bloody spur cannot provoke him on

That sometimes anger thrusts into his hide;

Which heavily he answers with a groan,

More sharp to me than spurring to his side;

For that same groan doth put this in my mind;

My grief lies onward, and my joy behind.

Fiftieth

IT has often been said that Shakespeare was not appreciated in his life-time. This is entirely a misconception. He was greatly loved and admired by his contemporaries. The following verses show that he himself was convinced that his writings would live forever, and that his friend would be immortalized in his poems.

**Fifty-
fifth**



NOT marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme!
But you shall shine more bright in these
contents

Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

THE feeling that human life is transitory, a dissolving picture, was vividly present to Shakespeare although he was not deeply religious. In this sonnet he assures his friend that though beauty fades and death comes he (the friend) will live forever in the poet's verses:



LIKE as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,

Sixtieth

So do our minutes hasten to their end;

Each changing place with that which goes

In sequent toil all forwards do contend. [before,

Nativity, once in the main of light,

Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,

Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,

And Time that gave doth now his gift confound,

Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth

And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,

Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,

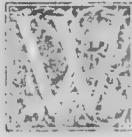
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:

And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,

Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

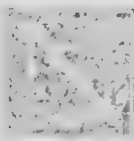
THE sixty-fourth sonnet has been greatly admired. Two lovers are standing amid the beautiful ruins of an ancient city quite near the ocean which has during the centuries worn away the sea-coast and now has crept close up to the site of the city. One of the lovers is supposed to be speaking:

Sixty-fourth



WHEN I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced
The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age;
When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
And the firm soil win of the watery main,
Increasing store with loss and loss with store;
When I have seen such interchange of state,
Or state itself confounded to decay;
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

THE seventy-first sonnet has wonderful word music in it, and is eloquent with disinterested affection. The writer says he is so anxious for the happiness of the one he loves that he would rather be forgotten at death lest the remembrance of him should make his surviving friend unhappy:



O longer mourn for me when I am dead
When you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world, with vilest worms to
Nay, if you read this line, remember not [dwell:
The hand that writ it; for I love you so,
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you woe.
O, if, I say, you look upon this verse
When I perhaps compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay;
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
And mock you with me after I am gone.

**Sebenty-
first**

SHAKESPEARE was not the only admirer who addressed verses to the alluring W. H. and there are numerous references to a rival poet who is usually believed to be Chapman, the translator of Homer. This writer was immensely gifted and Shakespeare had reason to fear the abilities of this competitor. Chapman thought himself inspired, which explains certain lines in sonnet eighty-six, which we quote:

Eighty-
sixth



AS it the proud full sail of his great verse,
Bound for the prize of all too precious you,
That did my ripe thoughts in my brain
inhearse,
Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?
Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write
Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?
No, neither he, nor his compeers by night
Giving him aid, my verse astonished.
He, nor that affable familiar ghost
Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,
As victors, of my silence cannot boast;
I was not sick of any fear from thence:
But when your countenance fill'd up his line,
Then lack'd I matter; that enfeebled mine.

MOST men have some possession that is their pride—wealth, talent, position, a palatial residence or some other cherished thing. But in the love of his friend the poet possesses a treasure outweighing in value all other possessions. Well might he tremble at the possibility that this one thing that makes him rich might be snatched away by the mutation of circumstance or feeling:

SOME glory in their birth, some in their skill,
Some in their wealth, some in their body's
force;

**Ninety-
first**

Some in their garments, though new-fangled ill;
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse;
And every humour hath his adjunct pleasure,
Wherein it finds a joy above the rest:
But these particulars are not my measure;
All these I better in one general best.
Thy love is better than high birth to me,
Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost,
Of more delight than hawks or horses be;
And having thee, of all men's pride I boast:
Wretched in this alone, that thou mayst take
All this away and me most wretched make.

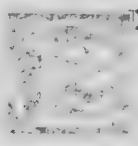
THE one hundred and fifth sonnet is among the most popular of the series and has been set to music with the title "Fair, Kind and True." The poet says that his regard for his friend is not idolatry but merely a testimonial to the rare beauty, tenderness and constancy which distinguished the object of his affection:

**One hundred
and fifth**



LET not my love be call'd idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
Kind is my love to-day, to-morrow kind,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
Therefore my verse to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
'Fair, kind, and true,' is all my argument,
'Fair, kind, and true,' varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
'Fair, kind, and true,' have often lived alone,
Which three till now never kept seat in one.

AMONG the sonnets of Shakespeare the following has been greatly admired by countless thousands of readers during the last three centuries. It is his famous poem on Constancy in Love:

 **LET** me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

**One hundred
and sixteenth**

THE following sonnet is among the most remarkable of all Shakespeare's compositions. In his plays Shakespeare speaks through his characters and the sentiments may be his own or not, but in this sonnet we listen to the greatest thinker of all the ages addressing his own spirit:

One hundred
and forty-sixth



FOUR soul, the centre of my sinful earth,
Urged by these rebel powers that thee array,
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? is this thy body's end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more:
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

